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Storytelling in Phnom Penh: A Research Journey

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Southeast Asia has inspired and informed the research practices of many accomplished authors, travel writers and correspondents over the centuries; Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham, Jan Morris, Richard Herr and Sydney Schanberg, to name but a few. This essay examines how travel served my own research needs and writing practices during a trip to Cambodia in 2018. To inform my travels I selected *River of Time: A Memoir of Vietnam* by British war correspondent, Jon Swain, who witnessed the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge in 1975. Differences and similarities between Swain's impressions of Phnom Penh and my own experiences, 48 years later, are noted in excerpts from my travel journal, as well as their influence on the completed artefact, a short story entitled *For What It's Worth.* This research project did not come without challenges and difficulties, and these are also addressed. Finally, this paper underscores the notion that travel for research purposes not only inspires and enlightens, but serves as a valuable methodology for researchers and writers.

> *Phnom Penh in 1970 was ravishing: Buddhist monks in saffron robes and shaven heads walking down avenues of blossom-scented trees...lovers strolling in the evening along the placid river bank by the old Royal Palace; elephant rides in the park; tinkling bells coming from the shrine on top of the mound from which the city takes its name. (Swain, 1999, p.13)*

Introduction

In 1975, Agence France-Presse correspondent, Jon Swain, witnessed the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge, which he later documented in his memoir *River of Time: A Memoir of Vietnam.* He describes with great lucidity the tranquil mood of the city before the rupture of its political and social fabric, and the terrible misery endured by its people in the aftermath. In 2018, I travelled to Cambodia to research and write a piece of short fiction set in the capital, Phnom Penh. I chose Swain's book as a starting point for my research journey because of its unique Vietnam War-era perspective, its themes of survival and adventurism, and its evocative prose.

This essay "unpacks" that research journey by tackling three lines of inquiry: i) What influences did Swain's writing have on my own research and writing practices? ii) What differences and similarities emerged between Swain's experiences of Phnom Penh and my own, and how did these shape my artefact, a short story entitled *For What It's Worth*? Finally, iii) What value does travel offer as a research methodology? Additionally, in a city whose culture, climate, language, food, and politics differ greatly from my own, this project presented challenges, difficulties and surprises. Rather than perceive these as constraints, I have noted them in terms of their value towards the final outcome—the completed short story. Before proceeding further, it is necessary to provide background for my research project, the nature of the finished artefact, and the reasons for choosing *River of Time* as a reference work.

Swain's Influence

One of the greatest challenges facing writers of fiction is the need to authenticate their story. In other words, how does the writer create a sense of "being there" so that a reader may feel "transported," or made to feel part of the narrated world itself? The easy answer is by researching the subject in books, periodicals and online sources, including YouTube and Netflix. This

methodology, I feel, lacks verve. No amount of reading can compare to a writer's first-hand experience of sight, sound, taste, and touch; to imbue it with a sense of realism. Adopting an ethnographic research strategy, or total immersion in the location itself, has in the past driven my research-writing projects in Southeast Asia. These projects have taken me to remote islands in Indonesia, the Golden Triangle of northern Thailand, rivers and cave systems in Borneo (East Malaysia) and historical battlefields in Vietnam. Cambodia represented new territory.

The writings of war journalists such as Richard Herr (*Dispatches*), Christopher Robbins (*Air America*), Tim Bowden (*One Crowded Hour*) and William Prochnau (*Once Upon A Distant War*), have informed my travels and served as inspiration for writing short stories. *Meet Me Under The Plumeria Tree* (Rowe, 2017), was inspired by a real life meeting with an ex-Special Forces soldier in Vietnam in 1993. *River of Time: A Memoir of Vietnam*, therefore, seemed an apt starting point for a research journey to Cambodia.

Unlike the gritty Vietnam War narratives of Herr and Prochnau, Swain paints a less frenetic and pulse-racing mood of Cambodia pre-1975. He seeks to harmonise with his surroundings and understand a culture so different to that of his native England. In *River of Time* he achieves a feeling of paradise lost, presenting a whiff of the capital, Phnom Penh, in the time before the fall of the city to the Khmer Rouge. Similarly, just as Swain did not foresee the events of 1975 that he would later write about, I too had no idea as to *how* I would use my research to write a short story. This is often the case for writers who allow their stories to grow organically from experiences, chance encounters, revelations and sometimes epiphanies. *River of Time* presented me with a reference point and a rough guide for my own experiences in Phnom Penh. In addition to urging me to look closely at my surroundings, Swain's writing informed my thematic choices. Poverty, desperation and survival are central to the war correspondent's experience, and as these emerged in his accounts of the war in Vietnam and Cambodia, so too, did I find them surfacing in my own investigations as I travelled about modern-day Phnom Penh.

The outcome of this research is a short story entitled *For What It's Worth*. It is a tale of an impoverished city tuk-tuk driver who steals a religious relic (a fragrant Buddha effigy) to sell to a wealthy Japanese tourist. Thematically, it examines the link between poverty and survival, and depicts how corruption catches those careless enough to fall afoul of an imperfect justice system. How my experiences yielded the data which enabled me to write my story is detailed in the following section.

Similarities and Differences

The building blocks for writing a short story are setting, character, plot, conflict, theme and dialogue. Setting is one of the most important elements because it represents the universe through which the characters move and advance the action (plot). While travel narratives and memoirs offer a rich source of data, they are the "lived" experiences of others, containing perspectives, bias and insights which do not necessarily (often times not) match those of the researcher-writer. Swain's descriptions of Phnom Penh did yield some interesting insights, mainly that, despite the recent and rapid modernisation of the city, some characteristics had not really changed at all.

One of these is the titular namesake of Swain's book, the Mekong River, the 4,350-kilometre-long waterway which cuts a swathe from China, through Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam before emptying into the South China Sea. In the opening pages of *River of Time*, after reporting on his first battle between the Khmer Rouge and the Lon Nol-backed government soldiers, Swain (1999) writes, "All the time, the Mekong was sliding by, a powerful but paradoxical image of tranquility" (p.23). Then, on reflection towards the end of the book:

> Before me was the Mekong, immense, unchangeable, sweeping past on its eternal journey to the South China Sea. The Mekong was the river of my youth. My eyes caught the golden glitter of sunlight vibrating on its rumpled waters; my melancholy mood dissolved into the promise of better days to come, and my spirits sang. (p. 262)

While the Mekong River beguiled Swain, as evidenced by his descriptions, I also felt its allure. During an evening cruise boat tour, I noted in my travel journal:

> A bank of cloud swallows the sunset as the old ferry passes by drifting sampans and gently sloping river banks where Vietnamese boat people tend plots of lemongrass. The captain murmurs to the helmsman, who smiles and gives up his seat. For a precious few minutes, the clouds part and the steering wheel is in my hands. I am suddenly a riverboat captain, pushing up the mighty Mekong River with the setting sun at my back and one of Asia's great waterways ahead of me. (Rowe, 2018)

In contrast to the tranquility of the Mekong is the frenetic hubbub of the city itself. I wanted to make mention of this in my story:

> The ‘foreignness’ of the Foreign Correspondents’ Club began to irk Heng, so he sought reassurance in the sounds beyond its long, reed sunblinds: the putt-putt of sampans along the river, the eerie sing-song call of a steamed snail vendor working Sisowath Quay...(Rowe, 2019)

Swain also describes the hardships faced by the citizens of Phnom Penh in 1975. As poverty, fear and misery gripped the city, he witnessed its slow decline into hell:

> ....The indolent charm of pre-war Cambodia was fading as the city began filling with refugees. The jasmine sellers were no longer small girls but mutilated soldiers who sidled out of the darkness, crab-like, on crutches. An irreversible process of destruction of a gracious way of life was underway. (p. 45)

The harrowing account of Sydney Schanberg and his assistant Dith Pran, with whom Swain shared the Hotel Le Royal before their expulsion by the Khmer Rouge, and depicted in the 1984 film *The Killing Fields,* underscores this shift from peacetime to the horrors of war. I allude to this in my own short story:

> On the iodine-coloured walls of the Foreign Correspondents' Club lounge hung photographs of the city’s inglorious past: images of monsoon-flooded streets, Khmer Rouge child soldiers marching through rain, landmine victims waving their stumps at passing personnel carriers… Nothing but darkness and misery. Heng wondered why such photos were on display. (Rowe, 2019)

To be sure, today’s Phnom Penh is a study in harsh contrasts. The hardships of its down-and-outs and have-nots are clearly visible: at traffic intersections, barefoot teenagers peddle garlands of flowers and toy guns, noodle sellers bed their children down on cracked sidewalks, and at dawn, truckloads of female workers can be seen rumbling out to the garment factories on the outskirts of the city. The roads are clogged with expensive four-wheel-drive vehicles and luxury cars vying for space with worn-out tuk tuks, cyclos (bicycle taxis) and begging amputees who spider-crawl between tourist bars and cafes. These observations helped me to devise a motive for my story’s financially-struggling protagonist:

> Heng's tuk-tuk registration was up for renewal in a few weeks, which would require palm-greasing at the Department of

> Transportation. There was also the matter of replacing his three balding tyres... By the time they had reached the Central Market in the heart of downtown, he was ready with his proposition. (Rowe, 2019)

Travel as a research methodology

The advantages of conducting ethnographic research in the field are manyfold. The biggest advantage is experiencing firsthand the sights, sounds, tastes, and other exotic sensations, and to use these to authenticate a story. For my own needs, I used a travel journal to record raw data, thoughts, ideas and perspectives, while portable devices, such as an iPhone and a digital camera, served to record audio-visual data which could be used to verify details later on.

Since short fiction adheres to a leaner, more focused narrative style than those of travel writing and creative nonfiction, it was not possible to use all the data from my trip. The following travel journal excerpts were discarded, but nonetheless reinforced in my mind that Phnom Penh is a city of contrasts (i.e. rich and poor, tourism and poverty, corruption and cultural pride, refinement and rawness). The first passage records a visit to the Elephant Bar, located inside the Raffles Hotel Le Royal, where Swain lived for a short time while reporting on the war. The second passage describes the local colour of the downmarket Walkabout Bar, several city blocks away.

> The waiter is a smartly-dressed middle-aged man with a soundless stride. He smiles, he hovers, his English is clipped and well oiled like his hairstyle. The Cambodian version of Stevens the quintessential English butler in Ishigoro's *The Remains of the Day*. I order a bottle of Kingdom beer; it arrives with a lacquered tiffin arrangement of spicy nuts and banana chips, and with pomp and ceremony which makes me shift uneasily. I take a sip, then another, and note in my journal, "On a hot day, Kingdoms rise and fall." Elephant frescoes decorate the ceiling, the table legs are carved elephant heads and wall lamps are cradled by carved wood tusks. The pool table stands forlorn at this early hour, the wicker chairs empty. Stevens hovers—I cannot always see him but he is there, waiting, tasting the air, monitoring the vibrations for the very moment I may think that I need something—a refill, a pen, a lighter. Hotel bars are the loneliest places on earth.
>
> I pull up a stool inside the Walkabout Bar on 109 Pasteur Street (Rue Pasteur), a dive bar with all the energy of a three-day drunk at three o'clock in the afternoon. Beer is cheap and cash talks. You could call it a sleaze pit, a knock-shop filled with meth-crazed

> whores with a wet bar frontage, where the median age of its white patrons is 45 and their mode-du-jour a faded bamboo-print shirt covering faded tattoos. These are men who have spent too long under a tropical sun, men with strawberry noses and saliva at the corners of their mouths waiting to drop. These are men clutching at youth, searching for a little sweetness before life turns truly sour. (Rowe, 2018)

Challenges, difficulties and surprises

One of the biggest challenges inherent in short story writing is working within a word limit; in other words, telling a story with meaningful themes, interesting characters and a dynamic plot—with absolute brevity and ruthless economy. Short stories generally take the form of an event, or series of events, which represent the denouement of a much longer narrative. This is true in *For What It's Worth* in which the central character, a tuk-tuk driver named Heng, must sell a valuable artifact which he has stolen from the city museum. The fact (revealed later) that he has already been caught by the police is the backstory, while faking the sale to a Japanese tourist in order to make kick-back money for the Police Chief represents the climax which comprises the short story itself.

Another difficulty of researching in foreign countries is the language barrier. In my case, not being able to speak Khmer meant that nuances and specific details were sometimes "lost in translation." This was especially so in writing from the point of view of my story's protagonist, Heng, where it was necessary to communicate and ask questions to local tuk-tuk drivers about their profession. Fortunately, I was able to ride with the same driver on several occasions, and this enabled me to build a level of trust through which I could glean information that would help me devise a realistic protagonist.

The week-long research trip to Phnom Penh yielded one big surprise. It came in the form of an invitation to attend a court hearing from a reporter for the English-language daily, *The Cambodia Daily*. Mr. Peter Ford, a British national, was tasked with covering the appeals of two former ranking members of the Khmer Rouge at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC, 2019)—known locally as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (KRT). To my surprise, prosecutors read an excerpt from *River of Time* to underscore the horrors of the atrocities for which Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan were both found guilty of committing and subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment for in 2014. Their appeals were dismissed.

CONCLUSION

Rudyard Kipling once said, “If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten” (The Chief Storyteller, 2018). Interestingly, both Swain and Kipling were British, grew up in India and went on to become writers. Swain’s book is both informative and highly-readable, and for it to have been tabled as evidence in a UN-supervised court of law only further bolsters its reputation as a truthful account of what happened during this tumultuous period in Cambodia history. During the course of my own research in Phnom Penh, *River of Time* served as a valuable resource. Writers have at their disposal a wide range of resources and research methodologies to inform and help them reach their final goal—a finished artefact. Without the chance to experience first-hand daily life in Phnom Penh, the completion of my short story, *For What It’s Worth*, would have no doubt been very difficult.

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